

*Time - He flexes like a whore*

*Time*, David Bowie

*I would not end here without once again warning you against the enthusiasm or the jealousy my "luck" inspires in you, specifically the opportunity to loll in a city whose memory doubtless haunts you, despite your roots in our evaporated country. This city, which I would exchange for no other in the world, is for that very reason the source of my misfortunes. All that is not Paris being equal in my eyes, I often regret that wars have spared it, that it has not perished like so many others. Destroyed, it would have rid me of the happiness of living here, I could have spent my days elsewhere, at the ends of the earth. I shall never forgive Paris for having bound me to space, for making me from somewhere. Mind you, I am not forgetting for a moment that four-fifths of its inhabitants, as Chamfort has already noted, "die of grief." I should add further, for your edification, that the remaining fifth, the privileged few of whom I am one, are no different in their feelings, and that they even envy that majority its advantage of knowing of what to die.*

*Letter to a Faraway Friend*, in *History and Utopia*, Emil Cioran

*...born out of a uterus I had nothing to do with...*

Antonin Artaud interpretato da Nancy Spero

The solo exhibition of Danh Vo – *Chung ga opla* at Villa Medici from 11 January to 10 February 2013 – is the second in a series of exhibitions focusing on the theme of *Academia* curated by Alessandro Rabottini.

Born in 1975 in Saigon, Danh Vo has affirmed himself in only a few years as one of the most original voices in the International artistic panorama, thanks to the variety of idioms with which he treats the great themes of history – colonialism, economic and cultural imperialism, the relations between East and West and war – from a personal point of view.

His work combines autobiography with the narration of great events, thus disintegrating the great division between History and personal history, between the dimension of individual experience and the horizon of world events.

At the age of four, Danh Vo and his family escaped from Vietnam to find refuge in Denmark, following the historical events involving his native country as well as his own family. War, the subdivision of ex-Indochina, the French conquest and conversion to Catholicism... these and other collective traumas are omnipresent in Danh Vo's work: a constant fusion between past and present, violence and poetry, destruction and transformation.

In his installations of objets trouvés and manipulated objects, the artist develops a formal idiom with references to post-minimalist art and Arte Povera, ethnographic and archaeological museology, commercial display and theatrical space.

On the occasion of his exhibition at Villa Medici, Danh Vo created a series of installations in collaboration with members of his family.

The first hall is organized in a layering of images and texts that create a temporal short-circuit. In this exhibition space, the artist has left to his own nephews and nieces, a group of eight children and teenagers, the freedom of drawing pictures on the walls. This extremely liberal gesture is counterpointed by the insertion of certain quotations which design a mental horizon where language spans space, time and generations: a passage from *Letter to a Faraway Friend*, the introduction to *History and Utopia*, published in French in 1960 by Rumanian writer Emile Cioran (1911-1995), who abandoned his native country to live most of his life in Paris; a line from David Bowie's *Time* (1972) and a quotation from Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) taken up, in turn, by the American artist Nancy Spero (1926-2009) in one of her works. In all of these sources we can recognize a sense of distance and detachment, of not belonging, refusal and nostalgia. Although a significant part of Danh Vo's work has to do with the lives of members of his family belonging to past generations, this is the first time that the artist includes the existence of future generations in his work, thus enhancing his reflections on time and history, in their inner and individual as well as their collective dimensions.

This action on space – where freedom and violence, innocence and a sense of the end coexist – serves as a background for a series of works expressing the themes of language and translation, movement in time and space, journey and desertion.

One of these works is 2.2.1861, a version realized in Rome in an unlimited edition: the artist had asked his father to copy by hand the last letter that catholic missionary Théophile Vénard – later canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1968 – had written to his father from prison shortly before being sentenced to death in Vietnam in 1861. At the time, proselytism was outlawed. This letter – a farewell from a son to his father in the form a floral metaphor of human existence – was written in French and copied by Danh Vo's father who did not understand the words. This oscillation between language and sense is further strengthened by the fact that Vietnam was the only Asian country during the French colonial period to convert its lexicon to the Latin alphabet. Both in this work as well as in the murals, the handwriting becomes a visual space within which lie the history and time of the individual lives, regardless of their comprehension or participation. The letter is accompanied by the work *byebye*, an appropriate photo of Théophile Vénard together with four other missionaries about to leave for Asia. The themes of travel, separation, leaving home and

extraneousness echo throughout the hall: in the words of Emil Cioran and Antonin Artaud, in the image of the missionaries and the reproduction of the artist's first passport photo. These are the same themes evoked in the great new work dominating the wall: on a series of busts from the Museum Store of the Statue of Liberty in New York laminated in gold leaf, the father of the artist drew the words Sweet Oblivion, title of a work by artist Marin Wong (1946-1999), whose paintings are a vibrant representation of life on the Lower East Side. The entire hall is conceived as a bizarre crowded family self-portrait, in which the stories and existence of the artist's relatives cohabit with the artistic and intellectual experiences that have inspired him over the years.

The intimacy of this situation contrasts with the monumentality of the context that plays host to the exhibition: a fusion of everyday life with the official character amplified by the title. Chung ga opla, is the phonetic translation of the Vietnamese expression indicating « sunny side up» eggs (in French « œufs au plat »). It evokes the image of morning food- sharing as a ritual celebrating unity.

In the Grand Salon on the first floor, Danh Vo has installed a series of works which, once again associate Villa Medici with the themes of movement and transformation of things: at the foot of the sumptuous tapestries which decorate the Salon we find a series of cardboard boxes for the transportation of Evian water which the artist had gathered in the streets and subsequently modified through gold-leaf lamination. These consumer waste products – which preserve a profound recollection of Robert Rauschenberg's Cardboards realized at the beginning of the 1970s – have thus become precious while still maintaining their fragility and a shabby aspect in strong contrast with the monumentality of the host context. The tapestries realized in Eighteenth century upon drawings by Albert Eckhout illustrate the exploration and discovery of exotic lands and an image of nature seen as a realm of struggle among different species, governed by the law of implacable force. The magnificence of these representations contrasts the scanty bouquets realized by Danh Vo with branches taken from the various trees present in the gardens of the Villa.

The exhibition Danh Vo – Chung ga opla is part of a cycle of three personal exhibitions that constitute an extension of the Teatro delle Esposizioni #3, which took place at Villa Medici in June and October of 2012. This cycle investigates the concept of Academy as a symbolic space where the idea of the presumed neutrality of art is superimposed on the concept of National identity and within which the dimensions of history, tradition, politics and culture come together.

The three artists involved in the project – each with his personal idiom – investigate the History of Art conceived as an area crossed by multiple forces: political ideologies, economic events, dominant historical narrations repressed by collective consciousness.

The exhibition *Danh Vo - Chung ga opla* follows Patrizio Di Massimo's project *THE LUSTFUL TURK* (23 November – 16 December) and anticipates the solo show of Victor Man planned for the end of June 2013. This cycle of exhibitions explores the concept of Accademia in its multiple meanings interlacing historical, aesthetical and political reflections.

Indeed, in recent years the international artistic debate has concentrated on a series of themes related to the processes of education and transmission of knowledge, the survival of ideologies of the past in the world of today and the possibility that visual art can work as an area where progress and anachronism can melt together. Thus the concept of Accademia becomes a prism in which it is possible to manifest the opportunities and contradictions of our times in relation to tradition. The figure of the Academy can, therefore, be explored as a physical, cultural and metaphoric site where the transmission of specific artistic knowledge bears a more complex history, consisting of a world vision which evokes, more or less explicitly, the traumas of history and the repression of ideology.

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